U.S. NAVY

**"We keep it floatin', fightin'. We're the *heart* of this wagon"**

HARRIS & EWING

**"The control room tells the entire story of the ship"**

We heard the machine guns open up, then the heavier ordnance, and in a moment the loudspeaker was vibrating with a continuous thunder punctuated frequently by the flat, ominous crump of bombs exploding in the water. We heard all this in a fascinated yet detached way as we watched our meters and gauges, and leaned to meet the deck's list as the ship dodged. Once the announcer said:

"A plane has just crashed on the deck of a destroyer." And again: "A carrier has been badly hit. She's afire." And as a sort of aside: "I counted seventy-six of the s.o.b.'s at the start. They're fewer now."

Finally they were falling like flies — two and three at a time. We had one tense moment when the broadcaster reported excitedly:

"A torpedo plane is coming in off the port beam . . . he's getting through our fire . . . he's close aboard . . . he's dropped his torpedo . . . it's falling . . . coming right at us . . . *My God! It sailed right over our deck!*"

### One Hit

Two or three minutes later we heard the sharp crash of an exploding bomb and knew we had been hit. The torpedo had miraculously missed us, but a bomb hit a turret. It was the only damage we suffered.

Of the scores of planes that attacked us, fewer than a handful got away. Our ship accounted for 32 and other vessels of our force got the rest. The whole action took barely 40 minutes, but we remained at battle stations until late in the afternoon.

That, I think, is one of the hardest parts of the engineer's job — being compelled to stay below after the fight is over, knowing the ship has been hit, but not knowing how badly, unable to learn which shipmates have been hurt. Happily, in this case the damage was slight and the casualties few. We went into a base for repairs. Soon we were again ready for battle, old-timers now.

It was common talk in the South Pacific in the early winter that the Japs were building up an overwhelming force to drive the Marines off Guadalcanal. **So when we stood out from our base one midnight, almost every man aboard knew intuitively that Guadalcanal was our destination. It was true.**

We sighted the island shortly after noon of a sweltering day and cruised until dark, the land just a blur on the horizon. It was bad, that afternoon; bad for the nerves. Not because we were going into battle that night; we were eager to get at it. But we were fearful because we knew the Japs had a submarine flotilla in the neighborhood. We stood continuously at battle stations.

We in the engine room are not especially afraid of bombs or shellfire. We are inside a shell of steel plus another layer of armorplate, and about the only thing that can hurt us severely is a torpedo. We are afraid of torpedoes, and I am not ashamed to admit it. So it was pleasant to realize, at last, that we had passed that dangerous twilight period and deep night had fallen. Twilight and dawn are the perilous hours for submarine attacks.

On our ship, it is standard policy to keep no secrets from the men; we tell them all we know about the odds we have to face. That night, then, I passed the word along, as I got it from the bridge.

"There are about twenty enemy ships at the north end of the island," I told my chiefs, "including battleships and heavy cruisers. We're going to be greatly outnumbered."

I could see no traces of fear on the faces of my men, then or later. There was, indeed a curious, fierce intentness.

At 9:30 that night I went on deck for a look. It was warm and clear with unlimited visibility. The island lay off our starboard beam as we moved north. Over it, close down, was an unceasing shimmer, like flickering lightning. It came from the gunfire of the Marines. Beyond were several flares in the sea where Jap transports had been hit and were burning. I went back to my station, and once more, as I descended, the doors clanged shut behind me. An hour of tense waiting went by. Two hours. Then, with startling suddenness, things began to happen.

### "We're Into 'Em"

The first word came by telephone from my smoke-watcher topside, whose primary job it was to be sure we made no smoke to betray our position. He also acted as a private reporter for us below decks. He said now:

"We're into 'em. Orders are to fire when ready."

An instant later the ship's broadcaster came in with a roar on the loudspeakers:

"There's a lot of 'em. Battleships, cruisers, destroyers. A big boy at about 18,000 yards getting — "

His voice was smothered in a deafening burst of sound as our 16-inch guns let go.

From that moment the ship was engulfed in a tidal wave of noise. Occasionally the voice of the observer could be heard, but usually only snatches of sentences.

" . . . Ship ahead exploded . . . burning like a torch . . . men in the water all around . . . passing through the wreckage . . . "

The heavy guns were thundering incessantly. I found myself counting the salvos, timing them.

"They've got us bracketed . . . three searchlights on us . . . hold your hats, boys . . . "

I am not sure that I heard the first shell hit us. I saw one of my officers look around inquiringly at me, and a moment later I heard another shell strike somewhere forward — a clanging, metallic thud.

At the height of the battle we had closed the range to 4,000 yards, which is point-blank for our guns, and were firing continuously as we thundered on at full speed.

Then, almost as suddenly as it began, it was over. The engine room is a noisy place, but it seemed sepulchrally still when the big guns stopped. After a time the bridge asked:

"Any damage?"

"No, sir," I reported.

The commander said, "Good! Make all possible speed."

I heard another voice say fervently, "Thank God for the engineers."

I looked at the clock. It was 12:50. The whole battle had taken 36 minutes.

**We had destroyed one battleship, three cruisers and either another cruiser or a destroyer. We had destroyed everything we fired at. . .**

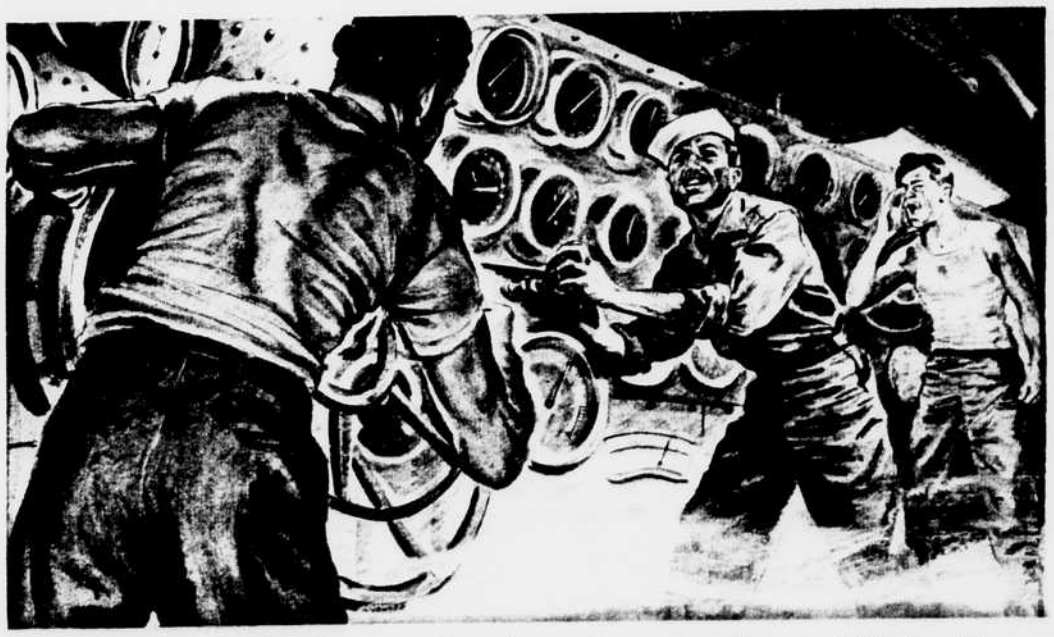
It was 11 o'clock next morning before we could go topside for a breath of air.

As I watched my men stream up the ladders, dirty and red-eyed, hungry, thirsty and dog-tired, yet still full of fight, I remembered what the case-hardened machinists' mate had told the boot just a few weeks earlier:

"We keep it floatin' and we keep it fightin'. Why, bud, we're the *heart* of this wagon!"

I felt pretty proud to be an engineer.

**The End**



**"I heard a shell strike somewhere forward — a clanging, metallic thud"**